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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RPO DUBAI 000039

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SUBJECT: IRAN: AFTER GOVERNMENT 22 BAHMAN 'WIN,' NOW WHAT?

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REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Iran's much-hyped February 11 anniversary celebration was cast by both the Islamic government and the 'Green Path Opposition' (GPO) as a potentially decisive day in their series of escalating confrontations. Although the day did not match such hyperbolic rhetoric, the IRIG did demonstrate its ability to control the event via both its rolling campaign of arrests and intimidation before February 11 and a substantial security presence during the day itself. Disrupting President Ahmadinejad's keynote address at Tehran's Azadi Square had been the GPO's main tactical objective, but there were minimal if any interruptions in the speech, and Iranian television proudly broadcast footage (some real, some possibly canned) of perhaps hundreds of thousands of pro-regime Iranians demonstrating their support for the government during the day. Some opposition members did gather at and near Azadi Square in spite of the IRIG's warnings, but their numbers were not significant in relation to both regime supporters (many of whom either bussed in or came out for the various free handouts) and to the assembled security forces. Post-11 February, regime leaders issued triumphant statements indicating that the Iranian people with their overwhelming presence had dealt a decisive blow to the 'American sedition,' while many GPO activists sought to put the best face on the day while also questioning GPO strategy and tactics and decrying the lack of effective leadership. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Since the December 27 'Ashura' demonstrations both the regime and the Green Path Opposition (GPO) focused on the Islamic Republic's February 11 anniversary celebration (22 Bahman' in Iran's calendar), with the latter hoping to disrupt and co-opt this regime showcase as a sign of its own popular support. After Ashura the IRIG significantly stepped up its intimidation campaign, arresting hundreds of opposition supporters, sentencing several Ashura-day protesters to death, and executing two political detainees. Many opposition figures proclaimed that 'millions' of 'Greens' would attend Iran's February 11 anniversary celebration in Tehran, overwhelming security forces and disrupting President Ahmadinejad's keynote address. However, the government's crowd control efforts proved far more successful (reftel), and most agree that the GPO failed to make its mark on the event. The official ceremony was largely uninterrupted and Iranian television broadcast footage of perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iranians on hand for the speech in Azadi Square.

¶3. (SBU) Available evidence indicates that limited numbers of the opposition did gather in and near Azadi Square, though their numbers were lower than during past protest days. An IRPO contact

who attended the demonstrations near Azadi Square said that those on hand were less confrontational, less cohesive, and less willing to overtly show green or chant anti-regime slogans. Indeed, reports indicate security forces aggressively confronted anyone with green paraphernalia and otherwise dispersed crowds, even without resorting to lethal means. Opposition leaders Mehdi Karrubi, Mohammad Khatami and Mir Hossein Mousavi were similarly confronted and routed after attempting to participate in the march. Karrubi allegedly suffered injuries from the attack, during which his son Ali and others were also arrested. Karrubi's wife Fatemeh, herself a former deputy minister and current political activist, subsequently wrote a letter to Supreme Leader Khamenei complaining of the 'torture' inflicted on her son Ali during his detention. Ex-President Khatami's brother Mohammad Reza, a former Majlis representative and head of Iran's major reformist political party, was temporarily arrested along with his wife, Ayatollah Khomeini's granddaughter. The total number of those detained is unclear.

14. (C) After the fact, GPO elements have expressed a variety of opinions regarding 22 Bahman. The more perfervid suggest the opposition itself was responsible for the large turnout at Azadi Square or instead claim victory from the number of security forces and intimidation necessary to subdue the opposition, deeming the government victory 'pyrrhic' or 'hollow.' Expatriate GPO leaders sought to put the best face on the day's events, with IRPO GPO

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contacts arguing that the regime's massive security turnout was an indicator of its fear of the GPO and that the GPO showing in the face of the unparalleled security presence was itself a GPO victory, as was the lack of GPO casualties. An IRPO contact who has participated in most of the demonstrations since the election similarly argued that opposition's inability to take Azadi Square was not a 'defeat' for the opposition because it had never been within the realm of possibility given the government's crowd control abilities.

15. (C) However, more realistic GPOers admit to post 22 Bhaman anger and demoralization. Some criticized the pre-22 Bahman hyperbole which they argue set unrealistically high expectations for the day. In this regard, some Iran-based opposition supporters speak of widespread anger with 'expat Greens' who from the safety of Europe and North America set an impossibly high bar for oppositionists on the ground, thus skewing interpretations of the day's events and demoralizing GPO supporters.

16. (C) Another significant GPO complaint was the 'Trojan Horse' strategy, whereby GPO marchers were to hide their green GPO symbols until they were on the main axis of the Tehran march or in Azadi Square. The consensus was that many 'Greens' in the February 11 crowd were too cowed by the extensive security presence to manifest their true colors, especially when so few others in the crowd were so doing and when the few who did so were immediately immobilized by security. This reluctance created a dynamic where GPO marchers were waiting for others to 'show their green' before they did so. (COMMENT: The actual number of GPO marchers in the Azadi Square crowd is unknown. END COMMENT).

17. (SBU) Many oppositionists have cited the day's failure as due to a lack of effective GPO leadership. The GPO's current leadership in Iran - Karrubi, Mousavi, and Khatami - has not directly commented on 22 Bahman after the fact. Karrubi in a February 13 interview with the Sunday Telegraph said that he and Mousavi would meet this week and announce a joint plan. He maintained that the opposition would seek permission to hold future demonstrations but without such permission they would devise alternative means of outreach to their supporters. Khatami and Mousavi have not released any statements since 11 February.

18. (SBU) For the government's part, there are no indications that the regime thought its putative February 11 victory in any way 'hollow' or 'pyrrhic.' The full array of government officials proclaimed the day a triumph of 'national unity,' with pro-government reports made reference to '50 million' turnout nationwide in support of the government, with five million of those in Tehran. Supreme Leader Khamenei issued a statement thanking the Iranian people for their participation, saying that "the presence of tens of millions of perceptive and motivated people"...was sufficient for the rebels and those deceived in Iran, who hypocritically speak of 'the people,' to come to their senses." The Armed Forces Joint Staff, The IRGC, and even Greater Tehran's IRGC 'Rasulollah' unit issued congratulatory statements ascribing the day's epic victory to 'the people.' Hardline conservative 'Kayhan' newspaper took special delight in relaying the days' events in describing how Mousavi, Karrubi and Khatami each were repulsed in their efforts to join the demonstration by ordinary Iranian marchers shouting slogans like 'death to the hypocrites.'

19. (C) COMMENT: Since the opposition adopted the strategy of co-opting national holidays late last summer, the government has continuously recalibrated its efforts to deter visible anti-government demonstrations without resorting to a level of violence that would 'test' the security forces or potentially engender a significant backlash against the regime. For 22 Bahman, it appears the government succeeded in finding the right balance of intimidation and force to effectively neutralize the opposition. Nevertheless, the government's 'victory' on 22 Bahman is tactical, not necessarily strategic, and though quiescent in the face of government brutality, it is doubtless the case that significant

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swaths of the population continue to oppose this regime in greater or lesser degree. The options for channeling this opposition into effective (or even visible) actions, however, remain unclear. Furthermore, the IRIG, having learned that it can neutralize the opposition on these 'remembrance days,' will now be less likely to contemplate compromise at either the elite or popular level. END COMMENT.
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